



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Promoting Accountability in El Salvador: The Case of El Mozote

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2:00 PM – 3:00 PM

340 Cannon House Office Building

Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good afternoon – I want to welcome everyone to this very important briefing on *Promoting Accountability in El Salvador: The Case of El Salvador*.

I very much want to thank our distinguished panelists for joining us this afternoon, most of whom traveled from El Salvador to be here today.

I also want to thank Kim Stanton with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for coordinating today's briefing.

Thirty-six years ago, nearly one thousand men, women and children were murdered by Salvadoran soldiers in El Mozote, El Salvador. It's considered one of the worst massacres in modern Latin American history.

Last December, I traveled to El Mozote with a delegation led by the Washington Office on Latin America. Four hours after leaving the capital of San Salvador, we arrived at El Mozote in the northern region of Morazán, near the border of Honduras.

At the time of the massacre, El Mozote included about 20 houses on open ground around a square. Facing the square was a church and, behind it, a small building known as "the convent," used by the priest to change into his vestments when celebrating Mass. Nearby was a small school house.

During our December visit, our delegation sat in the town square with survivors and victims of the massacre. We listened to their stories, shared prayers for their loss and suffering, toured the grounds where this atrocity took place, and visited memorials the community built to commemorate and preserve this tragic history.

According to eye-witness testimony, on December 10, 1981, the Salvadoran army brigade based in San Miguel and the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite infantry unit based in San Salvador, arrived in El Mozote. Over the next two days, these troops methodically and viciously murdered the town's residents and those of nearby villages.

On the morning of December 11th, troops assembled the people in the town square. They separated the men from the women and children and locked them in separate groups in the church, the convent, and various houses. According to eye-witness accounts, they then interrogated, tortured, and executed the men at several different sites.

Around noon, they began taking the women and girls in groups, separating them from their children and machine-gunning them after raping them. Many families were ordered to remain in their homes while soldiers set fire to the houses.

Over 140 of the children, some mere infants, were jammed into "the convent" next to the church. There, soldiers blocked the doors, aimed guns through the windows, and fired into the mass of children, murdering them all in cold blood. They then threw an incendiary bomb into the building, collapsing the roof and adobe walls.

In December, I walked with members of the community to the site where these children were murdered. A garden cultivated in their memory blooms on the site where they perished. A mural on the side of the church facing the garden depicts tiny angels ascending to heaven.

Beneath the mural are plaques with the names and ages of the children killed so brutally. They range from zero to sixteen years. Walking on such hallowed ground, I was deeply moved and outraged by the atrocity that took place there.

In October 1990, the Salvadoran courts opened an investigation into the El Mozote case, and in January 1992, the civil war ended with peace accords signed between the Salvadoran government and FMLN guerrillas.

In November 1992, the U.N. Truth Commission on El Salvador supervised exhumations of El Mozote remains by Argentine forensics experts, confirming that the stories told by survivors were indeed true.

Then, everything was cut short when the Salvadoran congress passed a sweeping amnesty law in 1993.

However, in July 2016, the Salvadoran Supreme Court overturned the amnesty law as unconstitutional.

And in October 2016, a judge reopened the El Mozote case and began taking testimony, which continues today. We will hear from today's panel about the content and status of that case.

There are many reasons why we in Congress should be engaged in the search for justice in the El Mozote case.

First, in the post-war period, the U.S. has supported a strong and independent judiciary in El Salvador, capable of prosecuting corruption and human rights abuses.

El Mozote is viewed as an exemplar case on whether this is possible to achieve.

Second, in the 1980s, the United States armed, trained and equipped the Salvadoran armed forces, in particular, the Army. At El Mozote, U.S. guns and bullets were used to massacre infants, children, women and men.

Third, the U.S. established and trained the Atlacatl Battalion. Ostensibly an elite rapid reaction counter-insurgency force, it was a major actor in the mass murder at El Mozote; nine years later, the unit also murdered six Jesuit priests and two women at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

Finally, at the time of the massacre, the Salvadoran High Command denied that any killing, let alone a massacre, had happened.

The U.S. embassy and State Department echoed those denials and denigrated the Washington Post and New York Times reporters who traveled to El Mozote and published detailed stories about the massacre.

For these reasons alone, I believe the United States government should support the Salvadoran judge presiding over the El Mozote case and the Attorney General's Office, in any request they might make, including releasing all information in our military and intelligence files relevant to that period of the civil war.

I would now like to turn to **Geoff Thale**, Vice President for Programs at the Washington Office on Latin America, who will introduce our panelists and moderate the briefing.

I very much look forward to hearing their insights on the status of the case and how we in the U.S. Congress might help in promoting justice for the victims of El Mozote, accountability and an end to impunity in El Salvador.